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TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: POLICE BRUTALITY IN RUSSIA DOES NOT YET ENGENDER
GRASS-ROOTS POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

11. (C) Summary: Recent high profile instances of alleged police brutality have sparked isolated public demonstrations that expert believe are not likely to lead to broader grass-roots political activism among Russians. Our interlocutors point out that many victims fear further harassment or retribution from a monolithic law enforcement system that is independent of local oversight and control. Russia's strict defamation laws might also prove a deterrent to those seeking restitution or accountability. Unfortunately, recent cases only serve to strengthen the animosity between the public and the police, who are perceived as preying upon -- rather than protecting -- civilians. While the capital's Human Rights and NGO community provide some protection, outside Moscow and other major cities, protests of police abuse are more easily intimidated. End summary.

Recent Isolated Incidents Raise Awareness, But Little Else

12. (U) It was a pedestrian case of police brutality. On April 4, local police beat several young men near the Sokolniki Metro station in Moscow. According to internet press reports, the policemen approached the group because one of the men had an open bottle of beer, a common sight on Moscow's streets since the city has no open bottle laws. According to witnesses, a physical altercation broke out between the men and the police. The two policemen were quickly joined by seven others and together they forced many of the youth to the ground. Witnesses reported the use of electric shocks by the police to subdue the young men. Some witnesses used cell phones to record the incident, and their photographs received wide distribution on the internet.

13. (U) This typical case of police brutality generated an atypical public reaction including a large, authorized protest on April 11 in central Moscow. The press reported that about 400 gathered at Slavyanskaya Square for the protest, although police permitted only half of that number onto the square itself. The protest was accompanied by the usual large contingent of riot police (OMON). Although press accounts indicate the protest remained contained within its specified area, the police began hitting and arresting protesters, mostly young people. About 20 were detained overnight. As before, on-lookers captured the incident with cell phones and broadly disseminated the images over the internet producing another sanctioned rally on April 18, which ended with an unsanctioned march down Tverskaya Street, the main street in central Moscow. According to the media reports, 200 people participated in the march and closed down the street for several hours. During this march, though, the police did not detain anyone, and the event was relatively peaceful.

14. (U) More typical of police brutality cases was the event on April 19 in Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurt Republic, where police forcibly detained 54 youth. According to a

statement by Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), some in the group had been drinking, and police decided to break them up to prevent fights or potential disorder. The statement went on to say that all were released after three hours. According to unofficial reports on the internet and from a local news source, the young men had gathered for a concert. A few minutes before the concert, police arrived and forced the youths to lie face down on the ground. The sources said the police released them later that night, much later than the three hours indicated by the police. Several of those detained reported the police had beaten them while they were in detention. The incident, while publicized on the internet, did not provoke a public response.

Ombudsman Mum on Police Violence

15. (U) Since 2006, the Russian Ombudsman for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, has not reported on police beatings or criminal violations by the police. In 2006, Lukin reported that police routinely used detention as a "preventive measure" against crime, which was how official reports characterized the Izhevsk and Moscow cases. Lukin documented several instances in December 2004 in Blagoveshchensk in Bashkortostan, in November 2004 in Bezhentsk in Tver Oblast, and in February 2005 in Rozhdestveno in Tver Oblast when police broadly violated people's civil rights as part of the police's preventive efforts. The report indicates that hundreds were detained without cause and many reported beatings and torture. Lukin's annual reports have not discussed police beatings or criminal violations by the police since this report.

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16. (U) Theodore Gerber, professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Sarah Mendelson, Director of the Human Rights and Security Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, studied the problem of police violence in Russia and published their report in the March 2008 edition of Law and Society Review. This study documented the weak statistical information available to accurately describe the problem of police brutality in Russia. However, in national surveys that they conducted with the Levada Center from 2002 to 2004, they found that almost one in twenty Russians claimed to have experienced first-hand violence at the hands of the police in the preceding two years. About the same number knew relatives who had been assaulted by police. Gerber and Mendelson contended that compared with other countries including the US, these proportions are high. Adding police corruption to the analysis, they state that police misconduct in Russia is "widespread, even commonplace."

The Public Response

17. (C) Our interlocutors found only weak organized public responses to police brutality. Natalya Taubina, director of the NGO Public Verdict, told us that while the April 4 case in Moscow resulted in a large protest on April 11, no public reaction followed the April 19 case in Izhevsk. She explained that the public mistrusts the legal system and does not see any chance of achieving fairness or justice. More importantly, though, the victims and protesters fear police reprisals. Police can use their authority to stop people, check their passports and registration, detain them for sometimes long periods of times, and even physically assault them with little fear of being held accountable. Taubina maintained that in Russia there are only weak mechanisms to bring the police to task for their offenses, and any attempts to do so have few if any guarantees of success.

18. (C) In explaining the anomaly of the April 11 march, Taubina pointed out that Moscow has a cadre of human rights organizations that can and do organize protests. Also, with

a support network in Moscow including Public Verdict, victims can, to some extent, be immune from further harassment. On the other hand, in places like Izhevsk victims or protestors do not have this level of support. She doubted that any grass-roots organization would arise as a result of the recent highly publicized police brutality cases. To date, according to Taubina, all protests have dealt with individual instances instead of the overall problem. She added that the energy for action dissipates after the protests are over and the incident recedes in people's memories. She could only point to a few non-governmental organizations that work with victims, yet none of these groups have developed a political strategy.

¶9. (C) John Cleary, an American professor of law at Moscow State University, told us that he was equally pessimistic about police brutality resulting in any grass-roots political movements. He maintained that Russia's strong defamation laws created a significant deterrent to even raising the issue. Under libel laws, the police can bring to court anyone who sullies the good name of the police by insinuating that they are unprofessional, abusive or criminal. Under this law, the person or media outlet making the claim bears the burden of proving that the abuse actually happened.

¶10. (C) As an example of Cleary's point, The Moscow Times reported on April 30 that Valeriy Gribakin, an MVD spokesman, said the Ministry would vigorously defend its honor and the honor of its officers. Another spokesman, Oleg Yelnikov is reported to have said that the MVD would monitor the press and investigate any instances of suspected libel. Gribakin linked these statements with the April 4 and 11 incidents in Moscow, claiming that some citizens and organizations had undermined the authority of the MVD with "unverified information." He further stated that the two incidents were examined by MVD and determined not to include police brutality.

Studies Suggest an Uphill Battle

¶11. (U) Recent studies of the Russian public's opinions of the police indicated a seriously strained relationship. In their study, Gerber and Mendelson coined a new term to describe law enforcement in Russia: predatory policing. Based on their research, they suggested that police in Russia do not act as service providers in the interests of the public nor do they act as a means to protect the interests of dominant elites. Rather, they claimed that Russian police

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use their positions to extract benefits from the society.

¶12. (U) Gerber and Mendelson traced the development of a predatory police force to the period before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Russia saw a spike in crime but was left with a centrally controlled police force ill-equipped to address the modern problem. In subsequent years, according to the authors, the Russian government did not have the political will to devote efforts to reforming the police. They said that broad reforms were needed to bring the police under local civilian control and make police officers more responsive to the crime problem. Without such reforms, public trust of the police as a basic social institution would remain low.

¶13. (U) Recently, Taubina's organization, Public Verdict, released a report examining public relations with the police and public opinion concerning reform of the police. The report showed that the Russian population harbors significant distrust of law enforcement. In yearly surveys conducted by the Levada Center, more than 80 percent of respondents felt they were poorly defended against police brutality. The same polls indicate that 80 percent of respondents consider police brutality a serious problem.

¶14. (C) Taubina claimed that the efforts of Public Verdict and the Movement for Human Rights have not gone completely unnoticed. She told us that the problem of police brutality has raised sufficient public discontent and that some politicians have taken it on as part of a popular campaign. She also mentioned that while wholesale reform does not currently appear likely, politicians do pay attention to what she and her organization say and have taken small steps to correct and intractable situation.

Comment

¶15. (C) While data do not exist to establish a baseline for the incidence of police brutality, the information we have gathered and anecdotal reports reinforce the extent to which it has eroded public trust in law enforcement (and the legal system writ large). While it has yet to become a rallying point for political activism, its salience -- particularly in Moscow -- is growing.

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